



Alice in Amsterdam

Fictionalized memoir written by **John Arthur Neal**

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Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"

So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly . . .

- Lewis Carroll

Down the Autobahn

Alice was beginning to get very tired of hanging around Leiden, Holland and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had bicycled through the town, but it had no nightlife or wild adventures in it, ‘and what is the use of a town,’ thought Alice, ‘without nightlife or wild adventures?’

So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the home-grown weed made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of another comfortable day was worth enduring its dullness, when suddenly a *Voice* spoke out to her. “People find each other in Amsterdam,” it said.

Now, Alice wasn’t really *looking* for anybody, for she wanted to travel alone and at her own pace during her *wanderjahr*. In 1976, a ‘wander year’ was part of one’s education to broaden one’s horizons. However, the lack of someone to touch made her burn with curiosity. ‘*Who* might I find in Amsterdam?’ she wondered. ‘A stranger in the night? A long-lost friend from years gone by? My soulmate?’

Before she knew it, she was saying “goodbye” and “thank you” to her hostess, and setting out for that city which promised so much.

Alice walked and walked, seeking the street to the ‘autobahn’ highway that would lead to Amsterdam. Finally she spied a sign and shrugged her backpack off, an event which drew a sigh of relief from her shoulders. Sticking out her thumb, she settled down to watch the sunset.

An hour went by, and the sun did indeed set. ‘Why won’t anyone stop?’ she asked herself, for this peculiar child was fond of pretending to be two people.

‘Because the right ride hasn’t come along yet,’ she answered herself, for Alice was also fond of pretending to be patient and philosophical.

At last, as twilight started to deepen into dusk, a Citroën pulled over, looking for all its welcomedness, like a hunchbacked matchbox. After stuffing her stuff in the backseat, Alice hopped in happily.

“I’m late! I’m late! For a very important date!” said the Dutch Driver, zooming back out into the traffic.

“I beg your pardon?” said Alice politely, for she hadn’t understood a single word—he’d spoken in a foreign language. ‘Or actually,’ thought Alice, ‘he’s speaking the native language, and *I’m* the foreigner.’ Alice was sure she *would* have studied Dutch in school if only she’d known that one day she’d be sitting beside a Dutch Driver in a funny little car going very fast. Alice wasn’t sure *how* fast because the speedometer was in kilometers instead of miles. Oh, it was all so confusing Alice despaired of ever learning it all. ‘The trouble with school,’ she decided, ‘is you have to go for a million years before you know everything you need to.’

“Ah,” said the Driver, changing gears, “you are English?”

“American,” said Alice, smiling uncertainly, for she didn’t want to sound as though she were bragging or acting superior to the English.

“From what part are you coming?”

Alice wasn’t sure how to answer this, so she said, “Well, I’ve lived in lots of places—different parts of Florida, Atlan—.”

“Nay, nay, nay,” interrupted the Driver. “I mean, North America, South America, Mexico . . .”

“Oh,” said Alice, beginning to understand that ‘America’ was bigger than just her own country. “The United States.”

“Ah,” said the Driver. “And what is the weather like in the United States?”

Tweedledee and Tweedledude

The Dutch Driver dropped Alice off at a streetcar station on the outskirts of Amsterdam. Alice waved farewell and climbed aboard a shiny electric trolley car, hoping the tram would take her . . . where? She had no destination other than ‘Amsterdam’ and, for all practical purposes, she was there. Oh well, into the *center* anyway. The center, she was told as she purchased her ticket, is Dam Square.

‘Fine,’ thought Alice, settling back to meditate, ‘Dam Square here I come. Perhaps whoever-it-is is waiting for me there.’

Alice opened her eyes just in time and got off the train in seconds flat. Looking around, she saw a statue in the middle of the concrete park. She strolled over, propped her pack against the base, sat down, and lit up a cigarette.

‘Well, I made it,’ she thought. ‘Here I am, in the *exact* center of Amsterdam. Now what?’

“Hosh? Peels? Shmock? Treeps?”

Startled by the sudden appearance of a Black Dealer, Alice stiffened and shook her pretty little head no.

“Fery gute hosh,” he said, as though that were her objection.

“I’m sure it’s quite nice,” Alice said primly, “but I already have some.” This wasn’t actually true, although she did have a few joints-worth of home-grown grass, courtesy of her hostess in Leiden.

“Maybe you want shmock? Fery gute shmock.”

Alice shuddered and closed her eyes as though in pain.

The Black Dealer shrugged and walked off, calling out to no one in particular, “Hosh peels shmock treeps hosh peels . . .”

Finishing her cigarette, Alice wondered, ‘What is treeps? Peels is probably pills, meaning downs like Quaalude. Hosh is no doubt hash, a pasty concentrate of marijuana, and shmock is smack a/k/a heroin, but what is treeps?’

Suddenly Dam Square was swimming with Black Dealers, circling the park like sharks. The last rosy tint disappeared from behind the clock tower topping the ornate building on the west side, and in that minute it officially became Night.

Two soul brothers approached and Alice got ready to rebuff them. But instead of starting out with a sales talk, Tweedledude asked, pointing to her pack, “Just come to Amsterdam?”

Alice nodded. “About ten minutes ago.”

Tweedledude’s eyebrows raised. “Ten minutes?”

Alice consulted the clock tower and said, “Well, maybe twelve.”

Tweedledude chuckled and looked over to Tweedledee to make sure he was being friendly as well. Tweedledee nodded and smiled.

Tweedledude then asked some more questions, i.e., where are you from and what part and so on, building a rapport, until he came to his purpose, “You want to buy some hash?”

“No thanks,” said Alice, “I already have some.” Then, as an experiment, she asked, “You don’t happen to have any MDA on you by any chance, do you?”

“MDA?” He looked over to Tweedledee. “MDA?”

Tweedledee could only shrug.

Tweedledude turned back to Alice. “We can get you anytheeng you want. Hash, shpeed, peels, shmock, treeps, cocaine, [and a few things Alice didn’t recognize], but what is MDA?”

“It’s a chemical, um, like acid—you know, LSD.”

“Acid? Oh, *sure*. You mean *treeps*! How many you want?”

He wanted to sell Alice a couple hundred. Alice only wanted to buy a couple *period*. They finally settled on six hits for twenty-five guilder—‘however much *that* is,’ thought Alice, still not used to Dutch money. ‘But after all, it would be nice to have a few extra for the person I’m supposed to find here in Amsterdam.’

Tweedledee rushed off to attend to the details while Tweedledude continued to make small talk with Alice. In fact, now that the contract had been agreed upon, Tweedledude seemed to have lost all interest in Alice as a person, and the talk became very tiny indeed. Alice asked about his origins, but he was unwilling to elaborate on the Dutch colonies in South America.

Tweedledee returned just as the conversation disappeared altogether and handed Tweedledude a wad of aluminum wrap. He unfolded it and, with Alice trying to sneak peeks, counted the roundish little nuggets. Satisfied, he crumpled it back up and passed it over to Alice. The money then disappeared into Tweedledude’s fist, and the two dealers dissolved into the dark shadows of Dam Square.

The Mad Physicist’s Tea Party

Alice, with a smug little smile on her face, hoisted her household onto her back and proceeded to wander into the most infamous red-light district in the world. Prostitution as legal as Possession, the Port of Amsterdam boasted of being able to supply *anything* money could buy. Hookers dressed in lingerie posed in storefront windows like manikins. One was sitting in a rocking chair in the lit window, reading a book while waiting for her next customer. Alice thought that was classy and very erudite.

Alice, so young and naïve, gawked in amazement at the licentious invitations and poster advertisements surrounding her. Holland’s film industry seemed to be decidedly 'blue.'

Throwing caution to the winds, where it was immediately whisked out of sight, Alice decided to ‘drop’ then and there. Entering the nearest bar, she ordered a beer with which to wash the LSD down and set her pack in a deserted corner. While no one was looking, she removed the silvery packet from her sock top and opened it on her lap. Feigning a cough, she popped a tab into her mouth and took a sip. The nugget caught in her throat a bit, and seemed to scratch a bit, and tasted of phosphorous. Hmmm. She examined the others, saw they were part blue and part tan. She put one to The Flame Test. FLASH! Alice had been sold *wooden match-heads!*

‘Probably for the best,’ sighed Alice, trying to be philosophical about the whole thing.

In any event, the excitement of the evening had worn off, and all Alice wanted to do was dump her weary body into the cheapest bunk available. She pulled out her handy-dandy *Rule of Thumb: A Hitchhiker’s Guide to Europe, North Africa and the Middle East* and looked up lodging in Amsterdam. Ripping out the relevant page, she crammed the book back into her pack and methodically finished her pint of frothy brew.

A long walk and two sets of contradictory directions later, she gingerly pushed open the door to a poster-plastered pub. Approaching the counter, she asked about a place to stay. She was told that the hostel was only open in the summer. Oh well, she ordered a beer anyway to pay for the information, useless though it was.

Alice then began watching a couple of chess players fight it out on a cardboard battlefield. The loser finally left, and Alice challenged the winner.

“Sheet. Everyting is sheet,” said Alice’s opponent between moves. “Fife years ago Amsterdam nice. Everyting nice. Now is sheet.”

“Why?” asked Alice, trying to focus her beer-bleary eyes on the pieces.

“Money. Dat is all pipple care about. Money. Fife years ago pipple help each udder and

seeng in de streets. Now nobody help nobody. Sheet.”

Five years ago would have been about 1971, Alice figured. The musical *Hair* was playing everywhere, college students protested the war in Vietnam, and kids ran away from home to live in whimsical San Francisco. “Times they are a’changing,” Bob Dylan reported.

Singing in the streets? ‘Well, maybe Hari Krishna chanters,’ Alice mused, ‘although Amsterdam might have been more uninhibited.’

The chess player tapped a nervous cadence waiting for Alice to make her fatal mistake, which, after studying the situation from all angles, she did.

He mopped up without hesitation, glasses flashing his impatience with Alice’s uselessly pondered attempts to save her doomed king. He took no pleasure in his victory just as he took no pleasure in anything, it seemed, for he was indeed mad.

Discovering that Alice had no place to sleep, and contradicting his previous statement about people not helping each other, he offered his spare room to the lost stray.

A timeless walk later, they entered a large, drafty apartment—high ceilings, bare white walls, naked light bulbs.

Stereo speakers were pinned to the upper corners of the main room. Alice’s host had built the sound system himself, for he was indeed a physicist.

“Everyting is sheet,” repeated the Mad Physicist, kicking dirty laundry into a corner. “You want tea?”

‘Tea’ to him, as to the British, meant a whole meal. Soup from a box, slice-your-own bread, cheese, meats and butter from a cubby built into the thick outer wall (it had a door on the outside, too, so the milkman could leave items), and of course enormous mugs of warm tea—just what the doctor ordered to quiet the complaints of Alice’s empty, though pickled, stomach.

The Mad Physicist played blue-eyed soul on the stereo and told the sad tale of his life. Sometime during the past five years, it seemed, the flower children had disappeared, along with his wife. Divorced and embittered, he now spent months at a time living in ‘sheety’ hotels as a depressed, though apparently brilliant, consultant, contracting himself out to think tanks and other esoteric tea parties.

Alice decided that, although he was probably quite harmless, the Mad Physicist *wasn't* the person the Voice was talking about.

The Mouseboat

The next day, Alice wandered around from Bureau de Change to Beefburger Supreme, trying not to step on dropped ice cream cones and puppy-dog pooh. ‘I thought Holland was supposed to be neat and tidy,’ thought Alice. Leiden certainly had been. In fact, she'd seen a woman in front of her house with a pail of soapsuds, scrubbing her sidewalk on her hands and knees. Alice figured every square inch of real estate must be precious, having been hard-won from the North Sea by the famous dikes. But then she saw a McDonald's and knew Amsterdam was more International than Dutch. Too bad; it was a beautifully quaint, though modern, city.

Actually, Alice was kind of excited to see the McDonald's since all of the sodas she'd had in Europe so far had no ice. Why they served their soda pop warm was a mystery to her. They even left jugs of milk sitting out. So she hustled over to the Golden Arches and ordered a Coke. It came without ice. She asked the clerk about it, and he said McDonald's goes by the customs in the countries they're in. For instance, in India the hamburgers aren't made out of cows, which are sacred. Hence, no ice in the Netherlands. Alice found it interesting, though disappointing.

All of this wandering around had somehow transmuted her rucksack into lead, so Alice

stopped to rest on a park bench at Dam Square. She watched thousands of pigeons strutting around on the concrete ground. Every now and then they would rise up with a squawky babble like a neurotic flying carpet.

The Queen of Pigeons stumped through the greedy masses dispensing favors from the armloads of grain-bags she sold to tourists. Alice counted the birds on the short, stout monarch's head and shoulders (seven, a magic number) and grew sleepy in the barely warm afternoon sun. She closed her eyes and tilted her face toward the feeble tanning rays, relaxing into a doze.

“Are you looking for a place to stay?”

Alice startled awake to see a mousey-looking young woman whose smile was friendly but very practical. ‘So *that's* what I'm doing. I was beginning to wonder.’

“Have you thought about staying on a houseboat?” asked the Mouse.

Alice hadn't thought about where she'd spend the night at all. “No, I haven't. Should I?”

The Mouse handed Alice a leaflet describing a canal-barge hotel—for only seven guilder per night. On the reverse side was a simple map with the announcement, **ONLY FIVE MINUTES WALK FROM DAM SQUARE!**

Alice flexed her aching back and thought, ‘Well, that settles it. Houseboat here I come. Maybe *that's* where I'll find the person the Voice spoke about.’ After studying the map for a couple more seconds, she held the flyer out to the Mouse. “I think I can find it. Thanks a lot.”

“You can keep it,” said the Mouse brightly, waving the ad away.

“But don't you need it?” asked Alice, thinking that maybe the Mouse got free rent for going out and drumming up business.

“Oh, there are plenty more back at the boat. See you.” And the Mouse scurried off through the pigeons.

Alice stood, stretched, yawned, blinked around at the funny city she found herself in, stooped, and slowly lifted her leaden pack.

Five minutes later, as advertised, she found the long houseboat. There were other floating hotels on the canal, along with private residences, restaurants, and even business ships.

Inside, she slipped her pack to the deck and looked around the dining room/lounge stretching most of the length of the boat. She saw quite a few young world-travelers on their *wanderjahrs* just like herself. Some were writing letters home, some were reading books or magazines, some were drinking beer and talking, or playing chess or guitars.

Going to the small kitchen/bar counter in the stern, Alice signed in, paid money out, and was told the Rules: (1) No Smoking dope on the boat and (2) No Smoking cigarettes down below in the sleeping compartments.

She was then led downstairs to see said sleeping compartments and was immediately engulfed in great clouds of smoke—cigarette *and* hash. The concierge pretended not to notice.

Alice deposited her pack under a bunk and went back up for a beer and a bit of chat. Sitting in a corner trying not to feel left out, Alice wrote a poem and peered surreptitiously at the others: Aussies, Krauts, Limeys, Frogs, a couple of fellow Yanks, two skinny speed-freaks (maybe) from Switzerland, and a guy studying for his MedCATs. Yawn, sigh—poor shy Alice. No one was paying the least bit of attention to her. ‘I might as well go downstairs and take a nap,’ she thought. ‘Tea parties at midnight with Mad Physicists can be tiring.’

The Cincinnati Cat

ClangClangClang! Alice woke with a start. Something was definitely happening upstairs. The talk was louder, the floor above her head boomed with the tread of many feet, the whole

atmosphere tingled with anticipation. Then there were more clangs and someone shouted down into the hold, “Last call for dinner!” Suddenly Alice was very hungry.

Dinner turned out to be stew—horsemeat perhaps, not uncommon in Europe. It wasn’t ‘indescribably delicious,’ as an ad used to say, just indescribable. Alice gave her last portion to a penniless—‘or should I say *pfennig*-less’—hippie who was about three weeks behind in his rent.

Plans for the evening began to be discussed. Gradually, Alice was included in a conversation about *The Other Place*, a mellow bar complete with live music and free-floating dope. Several of the houseboat lodgers walked over, with Alice tagging along.

The bar was everything it was rumored to be. Alice brought out her green home-grown grass, which was a welcomed change from the black Afgan hash usually passed around. People shared what they could, and no one worried about tomorrow. *The Other Place* seated about forty customers around a small stage platform. It was packed but not uncomfortably so. And it wasn’t so noisy one couldn’t have a conversation.

An old, haggard musician played acoustic guitar and had a harmonica mounted on a steel harness around his shoulders. Sometimes he sang—in English or Dutch—and sometimes he accompanied his guitar on the harmonica. He was quite good, sort of like a grizzly Bob Dylan.

Alice ended up sitting on a bench next to a soft Cat from Cincinnati with intelligent, gentle eyes. Click—writers each. Clicketty click click—they shared a love of science fiction and seemed made for each other—possibly soulmates and probably perfect bedmates as well.

What strange chains of coincidence and cosmic synapses had brought them together in Amsterdam thousands of miles from their homes no one knows, but it had happened. The Voice had been right!

Alice began to imagine visions of what could be: Playing chess by the side of a dusty

road in Yugoslavia waiting to hitch a ride on an oxcart. Zipping their sleeping bags together in a war against the cold, comrades in each others' arms. Scribbling shoulder-to-shoulder in their respective notebooks. Making love in an afternoon meadow with butterflies fluttering by . . .

“Well, I *was* on my way to England,” said Alice, “but I do want to go to Greece . . . No, no one’s expecting me in England. In fact, no one even knows where I am!”

“I have to use my Eurail pass up by the end of the month,” the Cincinnati Cat explained. “But I really don’t want to be in Greece alone. In fact, I’d *much* rather be there with you. You could take the train with me.”

“I don’t have a whole lot of money, and thumbing is free. When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow. I’ve already booked the ticket. Maybe you could hitch down and meet me in Athens, in a certain café at noon four days from now or something.”

How romantic! “That sounds great,” Alice said with a big smile. “Listen, I need to run to the restroom but I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here,” the Cincinnati Cat promised.

As Alice sat on the commode, she heard the singer start a new song. It was about waiting in a café in a foreign city at noon, waiting for someone to arrive, a lover who had vowed to be there on that day, at that time. The one who got there first ordered two drinks, expecting to be joined by the other one at any moment. But the other person didn’t show up. The first one slowly finished both drinks while waiting, waiting, waiting. When the glasses were empty, so were the people. It was a sad song.

Alice was stunned. How could the singer know what they were planning? Was he telepathic? Or at least, synchronistic? Was the universe sending her a message?

Shaken, Alice went back out to the saloon, knowing the affair was over before it began.

She would probably have been the one not to show up, given the vagaries of hitchhiking, and she certainly didn't want to hurt this wonderful person whom she already cared for.

The Cincinnati Cat also looked shocked from the song. "I have to go finish packing."

"It was nice meeting you," Alice said lamely to someone who might have been the love of her life. Her heart was breaking as she awkwardly walked the Cincinnati Cat to the door.

They both said "Goodnight" and meant "Goodbye."

Yes, people do find each other in Amsterdam.

Sometimes they lose them there as well.



[Note: Aside from the gender switch to match "Alice" with the "Wonderland" metaphor, I personally experienced each and every one of the interactions and events described above, including the musician's clairvoyant song. I was careful to avoid stating the Cincinnati Cat's gender in the story, but she was female—a sweet, plump lady, very much a cuddly kittycat.]